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Out of the Attic

Thanksgiving in Early Alexandria

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When you think of southern Thanksgiving traditions, perhaps dressing, casseroles and watching football come to mind. Others of you will be reminded of turkey, family get-togethers and an abundance of desserts.

But Thanksgiving was not celebrated regularly in southern states until after the Civil War. While George Washington declared two national days of thanksgiving while president, that tradition was not continued by his successors. Rather, it was left to individual states to declare it as a holiday, and many southern states, including Virginia, declined to do so.

In fact, in 1858, when Alexandria's mayor proposed a city holiday, the common council voted against the motion, the first time a city holiday had been rejected. Much of the early debate exposed a tension between two camps within the city.

On one side were those who resisted celebrating a holiday that they viewed as a New England holiday, related to the founding of Massachusetts and not related to Virginia. The other side focused on the religious aspect of the holiday and emphasized that a day off would encourage parishioners to attend worship services. One editorial in the Alexandria Gazette claimed to represent the turkeys of Virginia, who overwhelmingly voted against the adoption of the holiday within the Commonwealth.

But while Virginia didn't celebrate Thanksgiving, the Alexandria Herald shows us that for a time, in 1819 and 1820, Alexandria did. In October 1819, Mayor Jacob Hoffman declared:

"That the said seventh of October be religiously observed as a day of thanksgiving and prayer."

The next year, other southern locations such as Charleston and the state of Georgia similarly celebrated a day of religious thanksgiving in October. The Phenix Gazette noted in 1832 the different dates used in different localities in the United States for a day of thanksgiving.

For instance, Maine celebrated it on Dec. 2 that year, while Rhode Island and New Hampshire chose Nov. 25 for theirs. In contrast, Governor Trumble of Ohio declared Nov. 18 a state holiday.

An 1835 editorial in the Alexandria Gazette suggested that the reason the holiday was celebrated in New England and not Virginia was, "the peculiar spirit and character of its people and that with us, the day would not possess its proper efficacy." Others suggested that the lack of a state holiday was a reflection of Virginia's lack of piety.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

For instance, in 1848, a contributor to the *Southern Churchman* decried the lack of a state holiday in Virginia. Noting that Pennsylvania and Maryland had official holidays for Thanksgiving, the writer criticized Virginia's reluctance to declare a state holiday, saying, "It is difficult to imagine even a plausible excuse for the criminal neglect of a public duty; sacredly and without scruple recognized by other states."

As the debate over Thanksgiving continued into the 1850s, readers of the *Alexandria Gazette* expressed opposition to its official celebration. One letter to the editor, published on Nov. 15, 1858, claimed that during the last city holiday, "On my way to church, I saw open and bold dissipation, as if the day gave license to it." The writer insisted that "whilst I am opposed to a day of thanksgiving, I am not opposed to thanksgiving days, but think that every day that we live should be one."

President Abraham Lincoln established the annual observance of Thanksgiving in the United States in 1863, and the holiday was celebrated in Alexandria that year since it was under Union occupation. Sadly, there aren't clear records telling the modern-day historian which Alexandria resident was the first to deep fry their turkey.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.